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RELIGION AND ETHICS

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RELIGION AND ETHICS.

I will pursue the subject of my last sermon, Religion and its relation to Morality, more in detail.

My question is, "Is any religion other than purely scientific Ethics necessary or desirable?" The question is stated carefully. Religion might be necessary, and if necessary, of course desirable; but it might be desirable even if not necessary.

Let us understand at the outset the terms with which we have to deal. What is Ethics and what is Scientific Ethics?

Happily these are terms that may be defined easily and accurately. Ethics is simply the principles of right conduct. Scientific Ethics means the principles of right conduct not merely stated as rules, but evolved in an orderly manner; furnished with a basis in the nature of things, and combined together in general statements and laws. Thus, in a word, Ethics is the rule or art of right conduct in human life; and Scientific Ethics is that rule or art formulated as a part of the nature of things.

Evidently this is a noble study. Many persons think it is the noblest of all the spheres of human contemplation and emotion. Such persons say that the study of Ethics gives all the inspiration that human life can need. They say that it is the sufficient source and explanation of all human progress and happiness. They tell us that Ethics has this great point, that it can be understood. Here at last, they say, we have something toward which we can see a perpetual progress. By study of Ethics we can understand the relations of individuals to each other, and to society. The questions commonly called religious, these persons say, are remote. They are distant and dim. They are beyond our perception or our reason. Questions of prayer, of worship, of Providence, of the impenetrable future,

which may be or may not be, beyond the vale of death, are matters beyond our ken. So too, the question of unseen existence and of its relation to us; of the mind and the spiritual being, and their relations to the body. All such, they say, lie in a domain which we can not enter. Of the very existence of that sphere, we must remain in doubt. To try to penetrate it takes human time to no purpose. The mind then fills with hopes, desires, or fears, useless superstitions. Emotions awake which have no import or worth in human life. The mind thus is withdrawn from a fruitful meditation of present needs, and of our high responsibilities at the present moment. Instead of these useful thoughts, we are misled by contemplations either selfish or empty, or at least, far beyond the proper realm of our knowing powers. Better and nobler, these persons say, it is, both in effect on our characters, and in usefulness to the world, to be busy with the duties and needs which are to be understood clearly and lie closely at hand. We are in a world, they tell us, full of errors, weighted with selfishness, struggling with the problems of crime, of labor, of all manner of injustice, of education, of wealth, of temperance. Why should we waste our time thinking of our relations to unseen things that we know not, when not yet we have learned how to do our duty to each other? What is to be will be. What is to become of us when our eyes close in death, *will* become of us. We can not alter it, any more than know it. But we can go to work bravely and unselfishly, with love of mankind, to wrestle with the evil before our eyes; to uplift the fallen, to find and save the lost, to reclaim the criminal, to comfort the sorrowing, to heal the sick. *This* is religion, they tell us, so far as that word has any valid meaning for us. By this, whatever may become of us when we fly away, we shall have helped to leave the world better for those who come after; perhaps shed blessings along our path.

This is the moral teaching which my question supposes when it asks whether any other religion than this, pure, elevated Ethics, scientifically based and unfolded, is necessary or desirable.

Now, let me bear my witness to the nobility of this teaching. I would not say one word to disparage it. It were a

ruthless hand that would detract from the high praise of it, or dim the beauty of its usefulness. To my mind it is incomplete; it answers not the whole of human need or power, or of human experience; and this I shall try to show. But it is not the incompleteness of indolence or selfishness.

If I had to choose between Ethics and Religion, I would take my part with Ethics. Better to have a glorious, unselfish, hardworking, aspiring morality without religion, than to persuade one's self there is a religion without morality. I can not state this too strongly, I can not honor too much the ethical school for the sincere grandeur of their purpose. But I think they pursue their purpose by a cramped and narrow method. 'Tis a grand thing sought in a limited mechanical way. They turn into a side-lot on the great highway. Be that lot greater or smaller, it is not the whole landscape; neither is it the highway. I believe Religion to be, in addition, a great and sacred fact, both needful and to be desired.

I will not try in the beginning to define Religion, as I have defined Ethics, because the definition is by no means so simple or so easy. I could not define it without assuming some of the very things which are at issue with those who think Religion either unreal or untrue, as answering to no facts; or else useless and unmeaning, as treating of things unknowable by us. Still, my main reason for attempting no definition of Religion at the outset is that I shall give one before I finish, for it is right and needful to know clearly what we mean by terms. Yet, even at the outset, I must have some idea of what I mean by the word "Religion." I must use it in some sense understood clearly. So I will find this sense and partial definition in a question which religion asks. That question is, *Our origin*. Whence are we? From what do we spring? Now, Science asks this question too, but very differently from Religion. Science asks it precisely as it investigates the place of man among animals, simply from curiosity and thirst of knowledge. This though noble, is not emotion. Whether the answer be one thing or another, 'tis no matter to science. Science is satisfied. But religion asks the question "Whence come we?" with deep feeling, as we may conceive done by a person ignorant of his parenthood, yearning to know it. Suppose one has grown up with strangers. He

longs then to know of his father, of his mother, whether he had brothers and sisters, not as items of knowledge, but as things pertaining to deep needs of relationship, of love within him. In this way Religion asks the question, "Whence have we come? What is our origin?" So much, I think, will be conceded. If there be any such thing as religion at all, or any facts in us to which the name answers, it contains so much, at least, as this question, "Whence come we?" asked with yearning and love. Many other questions also it asks; but this at least, and certainly. So much, then, we will start with.

Ethics asks no such question. It takes our being here as it finds it, and is busy with the question, What conduct is proper for such beings as we are?

Now the question "Whether Religion, as thus distinguished from Ethics, is necessary or desirable," is an immense question, altogether beyond the scope of one discourse, if I were to treat it fully. It involves a discussion of the adaption of Religion to the human mind in all the powers of the mind. We could not discuss the question fully until we should arrive at a definition of Religion as valid as that which I have given of Ethics. We must have not only a valid idea of religion so far as the idea goes, but a plenary and complete idea of it; and then we should have to study the relation of that to human thinking, human feeling, human sentiments and needs. We should have to ask ourselves, indeed, What is the ideal of a complete man? These subjects branch so widely and run so endlessly through all the kinds of human knowledge and experience, that I must hold myself in this discourse strictly to one point, in order to meet the question with some thoroughness. But if I can show that Religion is essentially a different thing from Ethics, and different in a very great manner, because it contains an element which is not in Ethics, but nevertheless answers to a very deep reality in human experience, as it is now and as it must continue to be, then at least, I shall have shown a place for Religion; and it will be thought needful or desirable in proportion to the depth and worth of the human experience to which it relates.

To do this I will take the one point, of the relations of Ethics and of Religion to Time. I take this because it is fundamental, and because it has been treated less than any of the

many other aspects of the question which I might study. What, then, are the relations of Ethics and Religion to Time in the three-fold aspect of Time, the past, present and future?

Both Religion and Ethics stand in close relation to the *present*. Ethics relates to the present by its study of the laws of conduct. Its question is, What ought we to do in this present condition of things? Religion too is related to the present, because that one great question which we have agreed to start with, as included in Religion—the question, “Whence come we?”—means whence come we *hither*? From what origin do we find ourselves *here*? Religion must contemplate the source of us, as continuing us and continuing with us here; at least, the question arises necessarily, *Is it so?* Is the source from which we come existent also in the conditions in which we are?

Again, Religion and Ethics are both related strictly to the *future*. Ethics pertains to the future because it aims chiefly at a betterment of our condition. Its object is to improve human conduct, thus making the world better than it is. It bids a man devote himself not only to other people, but to coming times, laying plans for a nobler, a purer society. Religion, too, relates itself to the future because the question, Whence are we? What is our source? and the related questions that come trooping therewith about the present, involve the questions also, Whither go we? What becomes of us? What relation to our source do our destiny, our aim and end maintain? So then both Religion and Ethics have to do with the present and the future, the things here, and the coming things.

But what shall be said of the *past*? Do Ethics and Religion both stand related to the past as to the present and to the future? No. This is the privilege or nature of Religion alone. Ethics is a sum of principles which have no vital dependence whatever on the past. Ethics has a history, of course. It may have curious historical questions. It may develop its principles partly by the help of the study of its history. But every principle in it would be just the same without regard to the past. Not so with Religion. Its question, “Whence come we? What is our source?” questions the past. It stands in vital connection with the past. Without that meditation backward, that one

question would be impossible. Religion dreams of a time, as it were, before time; of a source which appears at one with eternity, as at least unmeasured, perhaps unmeasurable. It dreams of something before memory; from which, indeed, memory sprung; something which is the source of reason, the unfathomable abyss of love, the mystery of thought, the creativeness of imagination. It dreams of all these as *coming from a source* which is not simply *now* in them, but *always was*; in which the past reaches backward until it fades before the eye as the depths of the sea fade. This is what is said in the ode of Wordsworth on "Immortality." Our questioning of our Source is a dream of it, in a manner a *reminiscence* or presence of it in us. We come

"Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home.

* * *

Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither—
Can in a moment travel thither,

* * *

In the primal sympathy
Which having been, must ever be."

Here is a vast difference between Ethics and Religion. We see at once a difference by which Religion relates itself to an immense realm of thought and sentiment in human nature which not only is there, but must always continue to be there. With this, Ethics has no relation whatever. Both Religion and Ethics bring the human mind to the bar of the present; both set it face to face with the future; but Religion alone turns its face toward the past, by reason of that one mighty question, which, at least, is conceded to it if there be any reality in it at all, the question, "Whence come we? What is our source?"

Now, in *what way* are Ethics and Religion related to these three orders of time? In what different ways do they confront time by reason of their different natures?

Religion, so far as now we have defined it, looks into the past with *awe*. For its question of our source is at once inevitable and unanswerable. It *must* ask it; it must ask forever. In the asking lies all the answer. So Religion alone fronts the past.

But now, of both Ethics and Religion as to the present. To the present Ethics stands as related to the sphere of effort and of the direct scope of responsibility. Religion stands in the present with that same AWE with which it looks to the past; but to this is added by stress of present experience the sense of need, of dependence, of joy and of gratefulness. It looks at the present as a great sphere under an awful and also a benign sky, filled with sunshine, racked with storms. Man is a will and power, even a mighty power; he is also a creature tossed and torn ruthlessly by the tempests, and warmed and blest by the sunshine. These he makes not. He has sorrows and comforts, trials and strength, joys and bounding sense of being at home in the world. And the world he makes not. So both Ethics and Religion turn to the present; but Religion with a wonderful *awe* and *love*; and our Source in the past is conceived as one with our Dependence in the present.

To the *future* Ethics stands related as to the sphere of improvement, as giving scope for progress. Religion turns to the future with an *awe* to which now *trust* is added. For all the experience of the present with its bending sky of light as well as of storms, of joys as well as sorrows, and the sense of the unity of all in the one *Source* about which Religion must question,—this creates a trust that the same benefits, the same facts, the same right relations to human nature must go on. And so it trusts for to-morrow, and for next year, and for a life-time, and then, by a mighty leap of thought, for ten thousand and ten hundred thousand years.

Now, as yet, I think I have claimed nothing in Religion which flows not necessarily from its question, Whence come we? What is our source? which we have conceded to be in Religion if it have any reality at all. But now I may take one more step in unfolding the contents of Religion, the only other one I shall take in this sermon; that step is this: Both Ethics and Religion regard "*the Good, the Beautiful and the True.*" Very interesting it would be to try to trace the coming of these ideas into mental experience, but that is an immense subject which only I can refer to here. Very interesting would it be to trace the essential oneness of the Good, the Beautiful and the True; to show not only the fact, but the reason thereof, that nothing is beautiful

which is not true, and that nothing can be true which is not good, and that nothing can be good which is not beauty. But this, also, is a theme by itself. However arising, or whatever the intimate relations between the Good, the Beautiful and the True, there they are, shining, glorious, commanding, alike in Ethics and in Religion.

Now, how do these two, Ethics and Religion, stand related to these great ideas? I answer thus: Man looks abroad into the field of nature and of human nature, and sees the Good, the Beautiful and the True as now radiant all about him in Being. He knows the glory and majesty of the heavens, the tender beauty of the earth and the melody and music of its streams, of its waving forests and of its rainfall, the splendor of its summer and the royal ermine of its winter dress, its immeasurable beauties both in the grand and minute. Standing also on the hill of knowledge, the gathered experience of many ages, and surveying the field of human history, he sees that rolling, deep and everlasting movement, the "stream of tendency," sweeping on resistlessly to conditions better and better, floating, bearing on and up all good and true things, covering and sinking in its depths, out of human sight and memory, the bad and wretched—a consistent and beautiful progress; an evolution of health and help and strength along the highway of human history.

Man looks also into his own ideality, which can be only the reflection of the infinite truth to which he is related, of that questioned and yet unquestionable source from which he springs; and there he perceives the PERFECT. He lives in the unimpeachable ideal; he dreams far beyond the experience of his imperfection; and the Good, the Beautiful and the True are ranged with the absolute, the Perfect, the Infinite and the Eternal. Hence arises *adoration*, with which Religion fills the *present* moment. Here we find the question asked by Religion, with which we started, which turned the face of Religion to the past, completed and glorified in *the direct sight* of the Beautiful, the Good and the True, now radiant in Being. Before this, man bends in adoration. He no longer looks backward with deep questioning; he no longer looks forward with so strenuous expectation. He is immersed, satisfied, glorified in the *now*, in

the Good, the Beautiful and the True, which are now, pressing on every sense, following every thought, glorifying every feeling, *here, now* shining in *Being*. And the Being and our Source are one.

But again, man looks into himself, not abroad, where the "stream of tendency" makes human history divine, and the majesty and the beauty make the heavens and the earth glorious; or even into his own ideality where the perfect is; but into himself as he lives day by day. There he sees the Good, the Beautiful and the True, not as an actuality save only in little part, not radiant as an all-containing fact, but only as a sense of what he was made for, and what he must strive to be. He perceives evil within him, failure, unfaithfulness, triumphs of selfishness, and all manner of wrong; but also he feels with these things the command, "These things thou shalt not be; thou art made to produce in thyself evermore the Good, the Beautiful and the True." Hence, Ethics contemplates the present but as a place of judgment, a point in direction, a condition for disapproval and for condemnation as well as for resolution and for courage. It turns to the future and works for it. It demands faithful service in the present moment, for the pursuit of the ideal which is to work out improvement for the next day, the next year, or the next century, and build up the Good, the Beautiful and the True in the individual character and in society. Religion is the adoration of the Good, the Beautiful and the True as *now* realized and radiant in Being. Ethics is adoration of the Good, the Beautiful and the True as *to be* realized *in us and by us*. Religion, by its question, Whence are we? What is our source? unites us with adoration to our good, beautiful and holy Source, and adores and worships the glory from which we come. Ethics points not at all to our Source, but to our destiny in character; to the end and aim of our active nature, and our duties thereby, and to the unfolding of the ideal by us.

Here I come, at last, to the definition of Religion which I said I should give in ending, and it is the definition which of all that ever I have thought or seen I love best to dwell upon. Religion is that which binds us back; binds us, that is, to our Source; the sentiment, the love, the reverence and awe, the adoration, the worship with which we meditate on that wonder of our own being, which is the same wonder spread all before

our eyes, and before our reason; the unutterable emotion with which we think by day or night, that in whatever condition we may be, involved in darkness, chained in sleep, busy in duties, we live and move and have our being in that wherein also our Source is. We go not afar; there is no place where it is possible to wander; there is no region where we are not at home.

Religion is that which binds us back, back evermore to our Source. Ethics or Morality points us ever forward.

Thus, I have tried to show that of Religion and Ethics each has its own province and end. I have tried to show this by their diverse relations to Time. If I have succeeded in the attempt;—if, by taking as the meaning of Religion the simplest content which can be ascribed to it, namely, its question about our Source, I have shown that it alone relates us to one of the three orders of time, namely, the past, and if, still further, when I have added the element of devoutness toward the Good, the Beautiful and the True, (in devotion to which Religion and Ethics agree), I have shown that Religion stands wrapt in present adoration, in an unimpeachable experience of worshipfulness in present existence, while Ethics by equal necessity, points to the realization of the future,—then have I not shown a sphere of Religion in human experience which Ethics fills not. I think I have answered the question. At least, if my reasoning be true, it is answered; for then not one alone, whether it be Religion with its question toward the past, and finally with its worship which knows only the present moment, or Ethics with its primary insistence on present fidelity, but its ultimate pursuit of the conversion of the ideal into the actual,—not one of these alone, I say, but both are necessary to fill human life and answer its needs.

I would divorce nothing, either in experience or life, but like Wordsworth, take life all together, and

"wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."

NOTE.—The reader will reflect that in this sermon I have not tried or wished to define Religion, but only to treat it in one of

its aspects or qualities, or, more exactly, in so much of meaning or content as at least must be conceded to it by reason of its primary question of the Source of us, and then its step to veneration and awe of the Good, the Beautiful and the True as instant in Being, the Being and our Source being one. Indeed, to question of our Source is itself an act of reverence. Beyond this I go not in this sermon. See on this point the note to the preceding sermon, "What is Religion?"

If Religion be veneration and awe for the Good the Beautiful and the True, I affirm, that Religion philosophically (which is to say, rationally) is not possible to a speculative pessimist, and Religion actually is not possible to an actual pessimist. But Ethics is possible to both. For Ethics is summed in three points:—1. The primary absolute distinction between right and wrong, which is to say, the notion of duty as primary and elemental; 2. The duty of the individual to consider and judge carefully what is right and what is wrong; 3. The duty of the individual to act in accordance with his judgment, and to do what he believes to be right. Now, a pessimist may admit this Ethics. Philosophically he may admit it, for a universe which as matter of fact is bad, may not prevent an individual moral judgment against it, as is involved in the very affirmation that it is bad; and actually he may admit it, for a pessimist may live a good life and be an upright man. But Religion, I affirm, is not possible to a pessimist, because a bad universe can not excite love or veneration. Or to put it in other words, Religion is not conceivable in connection with despair. But Ethics is. For however bad the universe may be, an individual still may feel the duty to make the best of a bad thing and do what he can to make it as little evil as can be. It is true there seems some difficulty in such pessimistic judgment; for if the universe be bad in essence and a man good, he then must conceive himself as superior to the universe which has borne him, which is a strange thing. Or if the universe be good in essence, but inefficient and defective in power for the good, how happens it that the ideal and the power are not equal? But these are difficulties which inhere in pessimism, and not in my interpretation of it as regards Religion; and they inhere in it because it is a false philosophy, contrary to Religion, which is a true instinct or sentiment.

